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ABSTRACT

A study investigated a holistic approach to the assessment of students' writing skills in a high school that is part of a residential treatment program for adolescents. High school students were asked to produce spontaneous writing samples in the fall and spring of the 1990-91 school year. The students were asked to write about someone they admire, and had one class period to complete the writing samples. A total of 740 writing samples were scored by faculty members at the school using fluency, style, transitions, organization, and mechanics as criteria for scoring. Results indicated good inter-rater reliability and significant gains in writing skills for students during the year. Findings suggest that holistic scoring provided a reliable and efficient method of assigning quantitative scores to students' writing samples and that holistic assessment can be applied to classroom instruction. (Two tables of scoring criterion and data and two figures are included.) (PRA)

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Holistic Assessment of a High School Writing Skills Curriculum

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Abstract

This study describes a holistic approach to the assessment of students' writing skills in a high school that is part of a residential treatment program for adolescents. Students were asked to produce spontaneous writing samples in the fall and spring of the 1990-91 school year. A total of 740 writing samples were scored by faculty members at the school. Results indicated good inter-rater reliability and significant gains in writing skills for students during the year. Applications of the assessment process and results to student monitoring and classroom instruction are described.

Holistic Assessment of a High School Writing Skills Curriculum

Because of the need for authentic assessment of students' writing skills (Archbald & Newmann, 1988), a direct assessment of writing was included in the student evaluation system for the first time during the 1990-91 school year at Boys Town High School in Boys Town, Nebraska. The school is part of a residential treatment program which provides services to homeless, abandoned, abused and neglected youth from all parts of the country.

The curriculum at the school includes an English-social studies core program, intensive reading and writing instruction for poor readers, an emphasis on process writing, and limited implementation of writing across the curriculum. Teachers were convinced that students were making progress in writing skills, but standardized test results provided no documentation of this progress nor did they indicate student needs for writing instruction.

After a review of the research literature, a holistic method was selected as a direct assessment of student writing skills since it has been demonstrated to be a valid, reliable, and efficient method of rating students' writing samples (Elliott, Plata, & Zelhart, 1990). It was hypothesized that using this method of assessment, student growth could be documented and results could be used to guide writing instruction.

Method

Writing samples were collected in the fall and spring of the 1990-91 school year. Students in grades 9-12 were asked to write about someone they admire. They were also encouraged to think about the topic and make notes before writing. Students had one class period to complete the writing samples.

These writing samples as well as previous samples written by students were used to develop a set of specific criteria which were used to score the samples. The criteria included qualities of fluency, style, transitions, organization, and mechanics. A core group of teachers and research staff worked on these criteria until the group agreed that they could serve as a set of standards to judge the quality of student writing on an ongoing basis. The criteria are reported in Table 1.

Following holistic scoring methodology, the samples were read quickly by teachers who had been trained to give a quick overall score to each paper corresponding to the levels in the criteria. Each paper was scored by two teachers and the scores were totaled. Discrepancies were resolved by a third reader. A total of 372 papers were scored in the fall and 368 papers were scored in the spring. Since the scale has 6 levels and each paper was scored by two readers, final scores range from 2 to 12.

Results

1. Inter-rater reliability was 98.4% in the fall and 99.2% in the spring. 95% or better is considered desirable (Archbald & Newmann, 1988).

2. A frequency distribution of the scores is displayed in Figure 1. The mean for fall scores was 6.87 with a mode of 6 and the mean for the spring was 7.58 with a mode of 8. Both distributions approximate the normal curve as expected with holistic scoring.

3. Pre and post scores were available for 286 students. A paired t-test indicated that there was a statistically significant increase in mean scores from fall (mean=7.01; s.d.=2.06) to spring (mean=7.63; s.d.=1.98) for those students who were present at both times ($t=-5.45$. $p<.001$).

4. Follow up t-tests for each grade are reported in Table 2 and indicated significant gains for students in grades 9 and 10. Gains approached significance for students in grade 11. There were no gains for students in grade 12. Pre-post mean scores by grade are graphically presented in Figure 2.

5. Qualitative observations by teachers also suggested significant improvement in writing skills for students as a whole in the spring of the year.

Conclusions

1. Holistic scoring provided a reliable and efficient method of assigning quantitative scores to students' writing samples.

2. Results can be graphically displayed for administrative reports.

3. Scoring criteria can become a common language for teachers and students to use to judge the quality of writing.

4. Gains in writing skills can be tested and results can be compared to qualitative observations.

5. Holistic assessment can be applied to classroom instruction (Westcott & Gardner, 1984). Teachers revised writing instruction, created criteria for grading student research papers, trained students to rate papers holistically, and began using holistic scoring to judge the quality of writing of other writing samples in student portfolios.

References

Archbald, D.A., & Newmann, F.M. (1988). Beyond standardized testing: Assessing authentic academ chievement in the secondary school. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Elliott, N., Plata, M., & Zelhart, P. (1990). A program development handbook for the holistic assessment of writing. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.

Westcott, W. & Gardner, P. (1984). Holistic scoring as a teaching device. Teaching English in the Two Year College, 11 (2), 35-39.

Table 1

Writing Assessment Scoring Criteria

LEVEL 6:

Generation and elaboration of ideas or incidents that make the reader think about the topic in a way he or she hadn't previously considered.

Contains varied sentence structure and vivid word choice. Also may make creative use of language.

Easily moves the reader from one idea or incident to another. For example, through the use of transition words and sentences.

Clear sense of organization. Paper has an introduction and closing. Writer stays on the topic.

Few errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling.

LEVEL 5:

Generation and elaboration of ideas or incidents that show some moments of originality.

Contains varied sentence structure and word choice. Also may make good use of language.

Moves the reader from one idea or incident to another. For example, through the use of transition words and sentences.

Clear sense of organization. Paper has an introduction and closing. Writer stays on the topic.

Some errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling, but they do not distract the reader.

LEVEL 4:

Some generation and elaboration of ideas or incidents.

Adequate word choice and expression of thought.

Writer has some problems leading the reader from one idea or incident to another but does stay on the topic.

Table 1 (continued)

Writing Assessment Scoring Criteria

The paper has some sense of organization.

Some errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling tend to distract the reader.

LEVEL 3:

Ideas are generated but writer may ramble, digress, or fail to develop the topic.

Repetitious, inappropriate, or inaccurate word choice and expression of thought.

Writer does not lead reader from one idea or incident to another, but may simply list them.

Problems with organization.

Errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling distract the reader.

LEVEL 2:

Ideas seem isolated and fragmented. The reader never knows what to expect from the writer.

Few connections from one idea or incident to another.

Inadequate word choice and expression of thought.

Little or no organization.

Errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling interfere with meaning.

LEVEL 1:

Ideas seem incoherent.

Inadequate word choice and expression of thought.

Ideas or incidents are not connected.

No organization.

Errors in grammar, mechanics and spelling interfere with meaning.

Table 2

t-Tests for Pre Post Writing Scores by Grade Level

Grade	N	Mean (Pretest)	SD	Mean (Posttest)	SD	t
9	64	5.84	1.68	6.78	1.71	-4.02*
10	90	6.90	1.95	7.70	1.89	-3.79*
11	68	7.22	2.11	7.65	2.22	-1.89
12	63	8.14	1.86	8.40	1.77	-1.07

*p>.001

Frequency Distribution
Pre - Post Scores

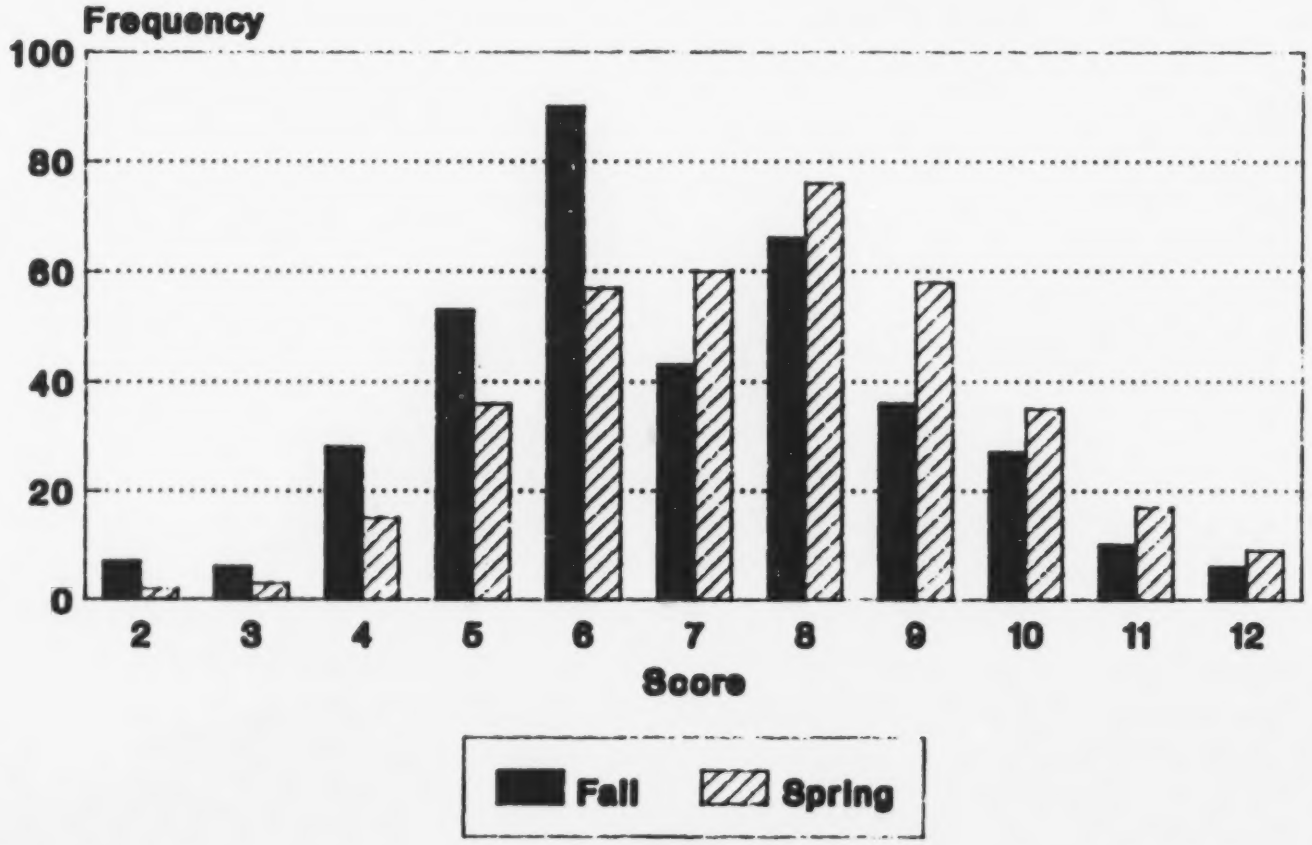

Figure 1

Pre - Post Mean Scores
By Grade Level

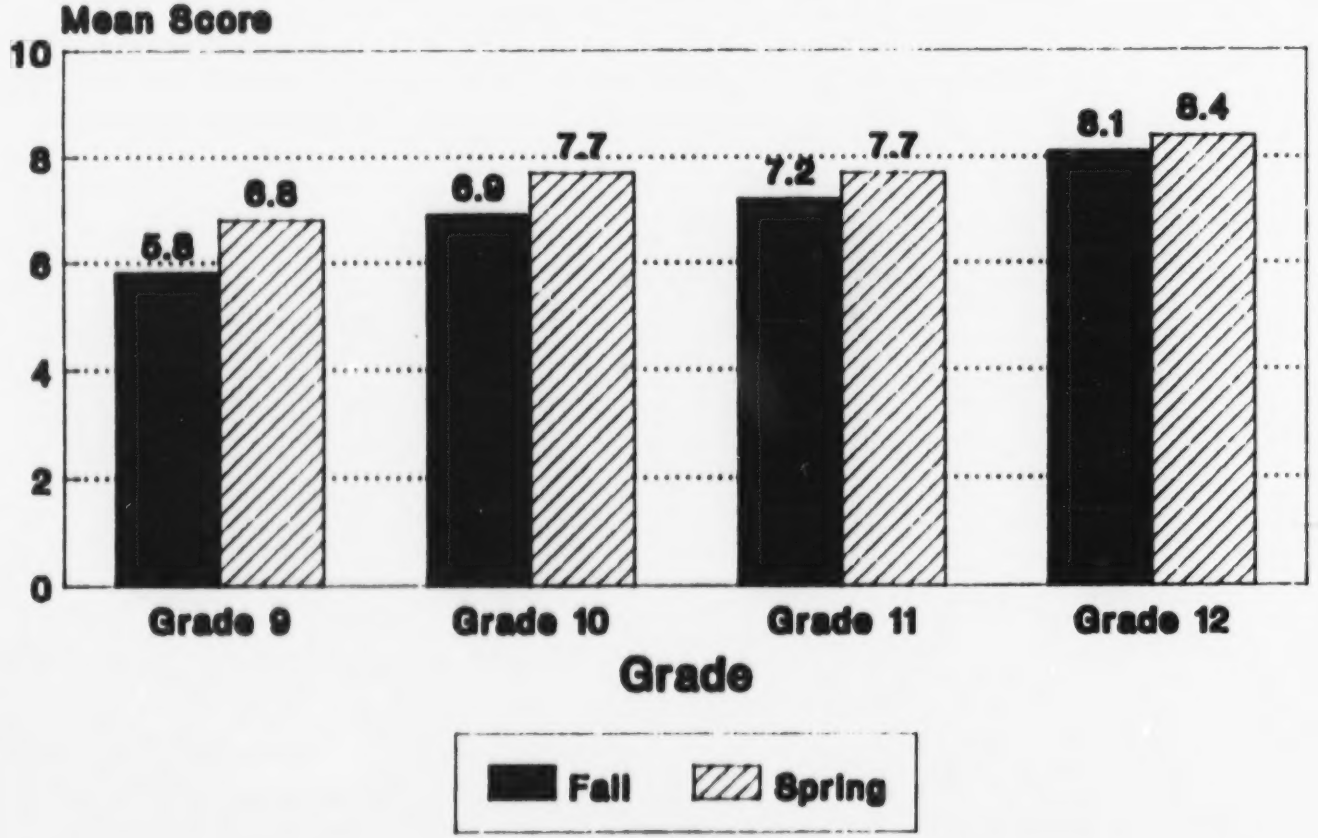

Figure 2